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RECONCILING STUDENTS' QUESTIONS ABOUT WAR AND TERRORISM: A POWERFUL TEACHING AND LEARNING APPPROACH

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Introduction

The social studies classroom is a place for student questions. The kinds of questions students often ask involve controversial issues that they have heard about on the news, popular media, and/ or their families and friends. The war in Iraq and Afghanistan and the related issue of terrorism is no exception. However, since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, many school districts across the nation have tread softly around the controversial subjects of war and terrorism. In some cases, this "tip-toe" effect has made headlines, as the following cases illustrate:

- The fining of a 26-year veteran teacher in New Mexico for refusing to have his students remove anti-war posters in his classroom (Archuleta, 2003)
- The suspending of an 11th grade honors student in Dearborn, Michigan for wearing an anti-Bush t-shirt to school (Simon, 2003)
- The pulling of the textbook, *History Alive! The Medieval World and Beyond* from a Scottsdale, Arizona middle

school amid parental complaints of its portrayal of Islam (Falkenhagen, 2005)

- The filing of a lawsuit by a Los Angeles high school social studies teacher claiming administrative retaliation in response to critical thinking activities about the war in Iraq (Garrison, 2006)

- The two-day suspending of Princeton High School students in New Jersey following a student-sponsored anti-war rally (Common Dreams NewsWire, 2008).

Administrators and teachers cite various concerns regarding controversial issues instruction. For administrators, the primary concern involves ensuring student welfare and conduct (Elseroad, 1970; VanSledright & Grant, 1994). Controversial issues and students' tenuous rights to freedom of speech, however, tests that basic function of school administration (Brooks, 2004; Simon, 2003). Parker (2005) noted that controversial issues, by nature, spark conflict among students. Dynneson and Gross (1999) observed that controversial issues generate polemical, divisive attitudes among students. In the absence of well-trained teachers and/ or formal policies regarding controversial issues, administrators may feel compelled to impose their own

restrictions (Wilson, 1980) or resort to legal action in the guise of behavior control. A secondary concern for administrators is their role as instructional leaders (Kaplan & Owings, 2001). Although the purpose of this role is still evolving in this era of high-stakes testing, controversial issues test administrators' ideological perspectives regarding curricular and instructional decisions. These perspectives span the political spectrum: one which calls for student inquiry and freedom of speech on the issues, even if critical of United States' foreign policy, and the other which may "promote[s] a jingoistic form of nationalism" (Hess & Stoddard, 2007, p. 231). It is with the latter that Westheimer (2007) cautioned schools from becoming the vehicles of prevailing government sentiment, by commenting, "during times of war, especially, schools are very often dragged into the inculcation of a so-called patriotic ideal, and that happened in World War I, it happened in World War II, and it happened for some period of time during the Vietnam War" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-4pgJgwnY4).

Whether the administrators' reasons for restricting controversial issues apply to student conduct or their personal and/or district ideological perspective, Mattioli (2003) reasoned that, "ignoring major current events is not good citizenship . . . teaching social studies while remaining absolutely silent about the ongoing war would be a disservice to students" (p. 127).

Research also shows that teachers have numerous reasons for censoring discussion about controversial issues. One reason is with regard to student maturity and presumed appropriateness of the subject matter (Wilson, Sunal, Haas, & Laughlin, 1999). Another reason pertains to reduced instructional autonomy as a result of standardized testing and accountability mandates (Merryfield, 1993). Teachers also sometimes feel obligated to remain neutral during times of international crises because of their position as a government employee. As a result, teachers may ignore current events which suggest "the United States' culpability in international conflict" (Knowles, 1991, p. 4). Jeff Passe's (1988) research

has shown that pedagogical preparation, personal background, and other internal factors may also help explain teachers' reluctance to teach certain controversial issues. Perhaps the most compelling reason for teachers to censor discussion and inquiry into controversial issues is that of administrative disapproval (VanSledright & Grant, 1994).

Despite administrators' and teachers' reasons for censoring certain controversial issues, students still have questions about the current crises in Iraq and Afghanistan, and about war and terrorism in general ("Iraq: Answering Student Questions," 2003). Knowing how and when to effectively engage in these discussions without causing disruption is foremost on teachers' minds. Which begs the question: if teachers want to be innovative and encourage inquiry into these controversies, how do they simultaneously reconcile a potentially negative reaction by administrators (and even in some cases, parents) and satiate students' curiosities? One answer resides in re-examining the critical role of the social studies, which is to develop students'

participatory citizenship skills, by applying the principles of *powerful teaching and learning* (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 1994).

Powerful Teaching and Learning

According to the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Position Statement, "Creating Effective Citizens," one dimension of the social studies is to prepare students for the "office of citizen" (NCSS Task Force on Revitalizing Citizenship Education, 2001). The NCSS recommends that students learn the "office of citizen" in environments employing powerful principles of teaching and learning; that is, experiences which are *meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active* (NCSS, 1994; NCSS Task Force on Standards for Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies, 2008). This means that a lesson in social studies is *meaningful* when it encourages in-depth inquiry and reflection on the part of the teacher and learners; it is *integrative* when it involves interdisciplinary connections and inquiry; and is *value-based* when it is

presented from multiple perspectives and challenges existing mindsets and beliefs. A lesson is *challenging* when it involves multiple resources and critical thinking skills, and is *active* when it involves students working collaboratively to discuss and find solutions to issues (NCSS, 2008). Individually, these principles signify engaged and authentic learning experiences; collectively, they signify the skills and dispositions k – 12 students need as adults in order to be prepared for an ever changing society and world (NCSS, 1994; NCSS, 2008).

Further, in its Position Statement, "Academic Freedom and the Social Studies Teacher," the NCSS recommends that students study controversial issues objectively and in ways that develop students' critical thinking and inquiry skills (NCSS Academic Freedom Committee, 2007). The NCSS repeats and expounds upon its language on controversial issues in its revised NCSS Position Statement on powerful social studies teaching. This position statement calls for students to grapple with multiple

dilemmas and multiple perspectives on issues which contribute to civic action and efficacy (NCSS, 2008). The current war and the related issue of global terrorism are two controversies where teachers can apply the five powerful principles for teaching social studies. To do so, I recommend a powerful approach that is inquiry-based, teacher-facilitated, and deliberately designed to develop students' critical thinking skills about the issues of war and terrorism.

The Powerful Approach Applied

There are many creative ways for teachers to apply the powerful principles for teaching about war and terrorism that adhere to best-practice recommendations in the areas of differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, and citizenship education (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 1995; Tomlinson, 1999; Parker, 2005). The approach that I will describe accomplishes each of these recommendations. First, the approach is compatible for diverse sets of learners whose needs range from requiring instructional scaffolds and modeling to those requiring

instructional tasks that encourage independent thinking. The approach, therefore, conforms to Tomlinson's (1999) differentiated instruction model in which "teachers provide specific ways for each individual to learn as deeply as possible and as quickly as possible … [while being] held to high standards" (p. 2). Second, the approach requires cooperative learning. Parker (2005) regards cooperative learning as essential for students as they learn "to be the kind of citizens who can and will share in popular sovereignty" (p. 386); in sum, the decision making and interactive skills needed in a democracy. And third, the approach is challenging, integrative, and exploratory. These are attributes which the National Middle School Association (1995) endorses for adolescents, and, like the NCSS, the NMSA considers these as a means to provide students relevant and rich learning opportunities that address their questions and curiosities.

I modeled this article's powerful learning approach after Parker's (2005) issues-centered unit in which a

teacher's class is divided into "research committees" comprised of 4 to 6 students (depending on class size). The "big picture" goal is *to provide students the opportunity to explore the persistent controversial issues of war and terrorism from multiple perspectives for the purpose of developing individual points of view substantiated with factual evidence*. The objectives are consistent with the NCSS' powerful teaching and learning recommendations:

1. The students will investigate war and terrorism utilizing a variety of resources and critical thinking skills (meaningful);
2. The students will investigate war and terrorism from multi-disciplinary contexts and synthesize information in written and oral communication (integrative);
3. The students will reflect upon diverse cultural perspectives to inform decision-making on public issues (values-based);
4. The students will create visual aids in the form of charts, tables, graphs, and maps to communicate facts about war and terrorism (challenging);

5. The students will work collaboratively to ascertain points of view and possible solutions to the complex issues of war and terrorism (active).

In addition to conforming to best-practice recommendations, my powerful teaching and learning approach is applicable to state social studies curriculum standards, therefore strengthening the approach's viability and instructional soundness amid potential censorship by administrators. Based upon a perusal of three, state education websites, Table 1 illustrates how the approach corresponds to their curriculum standards and to the objectives of the issues-centered unit.

Table 1.

State Name	State Curriculum Standard	The Issues-Centered Unit Objectives
Ohio	"Students collect, organize, evaluate and synthesize information from multiple sources to draw logical conclusions. Students communicate this information using appropriate social studies terminology in oral, written or multimedia form and apply what they have learned to societal issues in simulated or real-world settings."	1. The students will investigate war and terrorism utilizing a variety of resources and critical thinking skills. 2. The students will investigate war and terrorism from multi-disciplinary contexts and synthesize information in written and oral communication.

	Benchmark A: Analyze different perspectives on a topic obtained from a variety of sources. (Ohio Department of Education, 2002)	4. The students will create visual aids in the form of charts, tables, graphs, and maps to communicate facts about war and terrorism. 5. The students will work collaboratively to ascertain points of view and possible solutions to the complex issues of war and terrorism.
Kentucky	"Understanding the historical development of structures of power, authority, and governance and their evolving functions in contemporary U.S. society and other parts of the world is essential for developing civic competence." **SS-8-GC-S-5** Students will analyze information from a variety of print and non-print sources (e.g., books, documents, articles, interviews, Internet) to research answers to questions and explore issues (Kentucky Department of Education, 2006)	3. The students will reflect upon diverse cultural perspectives to inform decision – making on public issues. 1. The students will investigate war and terrorism utilizing a variety of resources and critical thinking skills.
Tennessee	**Standard 1 (Culture)** Culture encompasses similarities and differences among people, including their beliefs,	3. The students will reflect upon diverse cultural perspectives to inform decision – making on public issues.

	knowledge, changes, values, and tradition. Students will explore these elements of society to develop an appreciation of and respect for the variety of human cultures." **Standard 5 (History)** "History involves people, events, and issues. Students will evaluate evidence to develop comparative and causal analyses and to interpret primary sources. They will construct sound historical arguments and perspectives on which informed decision in contemporary life can be based." (Tennessee Department of Education, 2009)	1. The students will investigate war and terrorism utilizing a variety of resources and critical thinking skills. 5. The students will work collaboratively to ascertain points of view and possible solutions to the complex issues of war and terrorism.

To prepare for the issues-centered unit, I recommend that teachers identify and select a plethora of resources, both primary and secondary for students' consultation. These resources should include magazines (such as *TIME* and *U.S. News & World Report*), newspapers (such as *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*), almanacs, atlases, and documents pertaining to war and terrorism as can be retrieved from reliable sources on the Internet. A rule

of thumb when selecting the resources is that they meet the test of reputability; that the resources contain a mix of oral histories / personal accounts, are fact-based, and written by learned professionals (Altoff, 2003). Teachers may also want to consult the media specialists in their school libraries for additional hard print and Internet resources.

Consistent with Parker's (2005) issues-centered unit, I also recommend that teachers think about the current war and terrorism in holistic or big picture terms. The teacher does this by anticipating student questions about the war. The questions might be as explicit as, "Who are the major players in these events?" "How long has the war been going on?" "Why do countries disagree about the war?" "Why do the terrorists disagree with American way of life?" and "What is the relationship between the war in Iraq and with terrorism?" Another way of handling the question phase of the activity would be for the teacher to ask the students their questions. Either way, the next step in the activity requires students to classify the questions according to social studies relevance; that is, according to political science, history, theology, sociology, geography, and economics. This process

enables the students to understand the crises of war and terrorism in an integrated, rather than isolated fashion.

To demonstrate the integrated nature of the inquiry, the next step involves assigning students to research committees. Each research committee represents a specific cultural perspective about the war and terrorism. Suggestions for the cultural perspectives assigned to the committees include, but are not limited to:

1. U.S. government (i.e., the Bush administration and/or the Obama administration),
2. British government (i.e., the Blair administration and/or the Brown administration),
3. The United Nations,
4. The French government,
5. Al Qaeda,
6. The Taliban,
7. The Sunni in Iraq,
8. The Shia in Iraq,
9. The Kurds in Iraq,
10. The Afghan Northern Alliance.

Based upon prior experience, I recommend that teachers place students who are ardent and perhaps biased in their beliefs in groups whose perspectives are oppositional to those beliefs. This cognitive dissonance, or challenge of one's beliefs, is a critical feature of powerful social studies and empathy-building in which students "consider implications for self, family, and the whole national and world community" (NCSS, 1994, p. 6). Teachers can expect that most or all of the students will want to investigate the United States and other allies' roles in the crisis. Since the object of the lesson is to learn other perspectives in addition to that of the United States' and the coalition, teachers should deliberately assign students in order to ensure fair and objective analysis of all the perspectives.

Also consistent with the integrative nature of this issues-centered unit, teachers assign each member of the research committee a specific role to perform. These roles should be compatible with students' individual abilities and interests (NMSA, 1995). Although the roles require the

students to perform research utilizing the specialized inquiry skills of social scientists, they do not require prior experience in doing so. As a result of performing this research, the students learn investigative techniques used in the social sciences for the purpose of constructing new knowledge (NCSS, 1994). Most importantly, these "expert" areas of inquiry collectively represent the synthesis of each committee's cultural perspective. Suggestions for the social scientist roles within each committee include, but are not limited to:

1. Political scientist,
2. Geographer,
3. Theologian,
4. Historian,
5. Economist,
6. Sociologist/Demographer.

I recommend that teachers scaffold the social scientists' investigative techniques by providing their students with "task cards" for each member of the committee (see Figure 1). These task cards contain the role title and role responsibilities, and serve

as a checklist to guide the students' inquiry. These task cards also "teach" the students how to research their topic by asking the kinds of questions common to the specialized roles they represent. Figure 1. illustrates just some of the questions and topics the students may want to focus on during their inquiry.

Figure 1.

Political Scientist	**Geographer**
1. Research your sub-group's form of government. 2. Find out the issues and policies facing your cultural sub- group as related to the current war 3. Find out the political parties/ factions and their views on the war. 4. Learn what your culture's relationship with the U.S. is like. 5. Find out the internal/external conditions that have contributed to the conflict.	1. Research the topography, climate, and natural resources in which sub-group inhabits. 2. Find out your sub-topic's natural and political boundaries. 3. Find out the political implications of the boundaries. 4. Research to find out how your sub-group utilizes the land and resources. 5. Is the land up for grabs by Anyone? 6. Find out how their geography reflects their cultural values.
Theologian	**Economist**
1. Research to find out the major religion(s) worshipped by your sub-group (may be sects). 2. Research to find out their views of the war. 3. If your sub-group differs from Christianity, compare and contrast the traditions, values, and beliefs. 4. Research to find out how #3 has influenced their view of the war. 5. Find out stereotypes that Americans may have about them.	1. Research your sub-topic's natural resources, industries, and role in the global economy. 2. Find out the unemployment rate, trading partners, and trade deficit. 3. Find out the disparity between rich and poor. 4. Find out the effects of war on supply and demand of goods. 5. Find out how the crisis has affected the local, national, and global economics of your sub-group.

Historian	**Sociologist / Demographer**
1. Research the chronology of events leading up to the war from the perspective of your sub-group. 2. Research the important people of your sub-topic and their points of view about the war. 3. Utilize both primary and secondary sources. 4. At the end of your research, form a conclusion as to your sub-topic's involvement in the war.	1. Research the culture of your sub-topic and contrast it to that of the U.S. (if not assigned). 2. Find out your sub-topic's population density, literacy rate, ethnicities, languages, education, and mortality rates. 3. Research to find out your sub-topic's rejection or acceptance of the war and find out why. 4. Research to find out the effects of the war on your sub-group's people, events, and culture.

During the students' inquiry, teachers facilitate the research and learning process. This facilitation involves leading the students to the right resources, helping students to comprehend and clarify new information, and ensuring they find answers to their initial questions. To add to the teacher-as-facilitator role, I recommend frequent use of the dry erase board, overhead projector, and/or PowerPoint as a means to display the students' questions and discoveries, and as a way to segue into daily de-briefings. The debriefings allow the students an opportunity to discuss their progress and add new findings and questions to the original list. This process of facilitated learning, researching, and debriefing

provides the students (and teacher) a powerful opportunity to construct their own knowledge (Parker, 2005) about war and terrorism.

The final stage of the project is evaluation. Teachers may choose various methods for formative and summative assessment, and may feel it necessary to evaluate both individual and research committees' gains on the topic of war and terrorism. These methods may include paper and pencil criterion-referenced tests, and more authentic measures of assessment, such as group presentations, mock newscasts, and debates. In addition, written reflections before, during, and after the research may provide teachers a repository of rich information, and may elucidate the degree to which students' attitudes and perceptions about the crises evolved during the unit. These same reflections may also determine whether the students understood the scope of the crises, ranging from the multiple perspectives involved to the processes by which all participants negotiate and resolve conflicts.

Conclusion

The issues-centered approach that I described is responsive to students' interests and their civic and critical thinking skill development. It provides teachers a context to teach about a difficult and sensitive subject using all five of the NCSS–recommended principles of powerful social studies teaching and learning; as such, the approach is active, challenging, integrative, meaningful, and values-based. In addition, the approach reconciles students' questions amid potential censorship from teachers and administrators because it is grounded in solid pedagogy. I have referred to researchers' suggestions (Tomlinson, 1999; Parker, 2005) and specialized professional organizations (NCSS, 2008; NMSA, 1995) to lend integrity to the design and application of the approach. This issues-centered approach for powerful social studies teaching and learning also satisfies state curriculum standards. In perusing a sample of states' curriculum standards on the internet, I found that each called for student inquiry into multiple perspectives related to

public issues. Thus, if used regularly by teachers in a variety of contexts, the issues-centered unit for teaching powerful social studies offers infinite opportunities to nurture participatory citizenship skills in our students, as well as to influence students' attention to local, national, and global controversial issues. By following the example presented in this article, teachers and administrators can help reverse the trend of controversial issues "avoidance" and advance a new era of controversial issues "acceptance" for the purpose of perpetuating our nation's democratic ideals.

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